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THE NOVEL IN RECENT CRITICISM.¹

TWENTY years ago any suggestion of the treatment of the novel as a distinct and serious literary form would have been regarded by the majority of readers as out of the question, if indeed not a trifle absurd. To be sure, most of the novels which we now call great were written before that time; men and women had put their best thought and life experience into prose fiction, but "the novel," as generally spoken of, included in a prominent place too many of the class of Mrs. Southworth's, the Duchess's, and Ouida's lucubrations to win critical attention. Books of this latter class, in an ever cheapening and degenerating style of binding, are with us still, while publications scarcely more worthy find a ready sale each year, yet we now frankly admit the importance of the novel as a serious means of expression. It is not only in the breadth of its appeal, but also in the worth of its content, that the novel holds the foremost place in modern literature.

The thoroughgoing student of the question, who uses all of the German university theses on the Greek tale of wondrous adventure, the mediæval *roman*, and the Italian pastoral as displayed in Sannazaro's "Arcadia," will be able to trace, in a way satisfactory to himself at least, the novel's growth from a mere mustard seed of a beginning. Yet, with this long run in preparation for its starting jump, by the time

¹"The English Novel: Being a Short Sketch of Its History from the Earliest Times to the Appearance of 'Waverley.'" By Walter Raleigh, Professor of Modern Literature at University College, Liverpool. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1894.

"A Century of French Fiction." By Benjamin W. Wells, Professor of Modern Languages in the University of the South. New York: Dodd, Mead, & Co. 1898.

"The Development of the English Novel." By Wilbur L. Cross, Assistant Professor of English in the Sheffield Scientific School of Yale University. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1900.

"The Evolution of the English Novel." By Francis Hovey Stoddard, Professor of English Literature in New York University. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1900.

of Elizabeth the novel in English can boast of an extremely slight advance. Lyly's word-juggling "Euphues," the extravagant tale of somewhat picaresque adventure, "Jack Wilton," and the long, fantastic, and tediously, charming "Arcadia" of Sidney, are the only books whose importance can ask a stretching of the term novel so as to include them. These are clearly of less significance than the drama and several kinds of poetical composition, and a brief consideration of circumstances will make the causes of this plain.

With a reading public as small as that of the time of Elizabeth no one thought of writing novels for money—the sole *raison d'être* of many modern books. On the other hand, literature as a profession was practically non-existent; and as no gentleman concerned himself with literature save as an "accomplishment," there was lacking also the impulse of fame to foster the development of prose. Money was to be made in the drama, and what fame literature had to give was to be won in the various kinds of verse, the lyric and the sonnet being the most popular because capable of being produced in the briefest space of time. These conditions and this attitude lasted well into the seventeenth century, especially with the Cavalier party; but the religious and moral upheaval and relapse due to the Puritan Revolution, and the involuntary stay of many cultured Englishmen abroad, brought about new tendencies.

From the "Arcadia" to the "Spectator," however, the English prose of the kind we have to deal with is of the slightest importance. Outside the ranks of artistic prose—prose meant, as the novel is, primarily to give pleasure—there are of course the infinitely numerous controversial tracts about the civil war, to the end of which even Prof. Gardiner has not come; but these are frankly non-literary. The literary prose of the seventeenth century is represented by the superb difficulty of the "Areopagitica," the lucid prefaces of Dryden, and the simple truth of the "Pilgrim's Progress." There is a remarkable advance already in the power and flexibility of English prose, but as yet few premonitions of the novel.

After all the investigation which one's patience will stand into sources, analogies, and the like, one is tempted to drop as worthless the results up to this point, and to find the real beginning of the English novel in the clever idea of Steele and its cleverer execution by Addison. Unity and plot have come to be so important in the modern novel that the idea that this form of literary art could have its origin in any production so loosely articulated as the "Spectator" papers seems unreasonable until a moment's thought is given. Then "The Vicar of Wakefield" and the whole series of eighteenth century novels rise, with their character sketches, incident, description, and sermons, all hung on the slightest thread of a plot. In the de Coverley papers we have all of the essential concomitants of the novel save the desire on the part of the public to have this particular portion of their amusement served in "two volumes of twelves" rather than in daily papers which could be read in the intervals of a breakfast. A convincing proof that the essay periodicals of Queen Anne's time are the immediate forerunner of the eighteenth century novel is to be found on a comparison of the papers relating to Sir Roger de Coverley with "The Vicar of Wakefield." There is a similarity in the two central figures, in the treatment of women, though this is a slight element in the de Coverley papers, and in the whole attitude towards life. "The Vicar," with its ceaseless charm, has an absurd plot, and these papers of Addison have no plot with their ceaseless charm. Both are the reproduction of life by men of keen insight and kindly wisdom, and both afford to their readers the endless satisfaction of saying of these scenes from life, "How true that is! I've noticed it a thousand times, but never had the power to express it once."

We have, of course, no means of knowing with accuracy how many more people read as a constant amusement after the great success of the "Spectator" than before, but this increase was striking enough to provoke much contemporary comment. Therefore, besides furnishing, in those papers which concern Sir Roger de Coverley, an immediate predecessor of the novel, Addison and Steele were carefully nurs-

ing the infant reading public of England from the milk of a semi-weekly character sketch up to the solid meat to which it was to turn when "Pamela" appeared in 1740.

From Addison and Defoe, through Richardson, Fielding, Smollet, and Goldsmith to Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray the rivulet of artistic prose increases into a lordly stream. Since men began to write for the general reading public and not for patrons, people of the mode, or an aristocracy whose title to judge things literary was based on an ability to write Latin verses which would scan, it seems clear to us that there has been no time during which the preëminent importance of the novel could rightly be doubted. No one could oppose a novel to the success which Pope's "Homer" achieved, but the public to which this paying translation appealed was wonderfully small. As soon as Addison and Steele had got their public into a slight degree of self-consciousness, it was going to neglect the hard and brilliant Pope for the gush and tears of Richardson.

Yet the satire and the drama, the ode and the narrative poem were not to be superseded without a struggle; if people read the novels, they talked about and quoted the poems, and bought gilt copies for their front-room tables. The immense conservatism of the English universities, whose literary ideals were all formed by the dead languages in which the novel did not exist, has delayed the critical recognition of the place of the novel long after that place was a reality. No poem in this century, save perhaps some of Scott's and Byron's "Childe Harold," has gained one tithe of the popular applause which a hundred volumes of fiction have enjoyed. For good or ill, every other literary form, from the epic to that creation of the nineteenth century, the Macaulay type of review-essay, has been hopelessly vanquished by the novel, and even the professional critics are seeing that the novel is really what it has been for decades—the literary form in which the mind and life of this period are to find expression. What the drama was to Shakespeare, the satire to Pope, and the meditative poem to Wordsworth, the novel is to the thinkers and creators of this generation. There can be no clearer

proof that this is now recognized by all than the publication in the last few years of a number of books intended to guide the student and general reader in the systematic study of the novel.

Publishers recognized the need of some book of criticism on the novel before the critics in colleges did, and we began several years ago to have essays, more or less lengthy, on the novel treated from the point of view of the novelist. Many wise and bright things have been said by these writers, as is to be expected when men speak of that whereby they earn their bread, though it is a little amusing to see how carefully each writer "praises the ship that carries him over," whether it be the novel of adventure, the romance of travel and foreign life, or fiction of scrupulous realism. One novelist, who seems to have in his make-up a little more of the mercenary than we like to attach to the creators of our heroes, declares that to him the novel is a "pocket theater," thus gaining, straightway, freedom to be as frivolous as we allow our stage to be; another who reiterates what we all acknowledge yet often forget—namely, that if a novel is true it cannot be wicked or weak—wishes to remove from the high place to which the world has assigned them too many of the novels which do not come under the law of his minute realism. There are with authors, as with readers, the two conflicting desires of having the novel remove you from the world, and of having it help you to keep your mind on the world so as to solve better your own problems.

Another class of books dealing with the novel is much more practical and its authors more free from the charge of having an ax to grind. These come in recognition of the fact that the reading public, especially the feminine and more responsive portion of it, is reading novels steadily, and will continue to do so; books of this kind try, therefore, to make this absorbing time-destroyer somewhat more of an intellectual exercise and somewhat less of a narcotic. Accordingly with various devices for club readings and the like, they try to arouse interest in the great novels which are really worth reading. The good that is done by such books and by the

clubs which they suggest, in the one particular of lessening the terrible monotony of life in small places, fully justifies their existence and multiplication.

The critical treatment of the novel, its investigation as one of the distinct forms of literary art comparable in importance to the epic, the drama, or the narrative poem, came naturally somewhat later, and it is decidedly a more scholarly undertaking than could be expected of the authors of books of the foregoing classes. Critics of ability and wide reading are bringing to the consideration of the subject the best they have of time and thought; here is a historical account of the novel, here a critical study of it as a form of literary art, here a careful and scholarly compendium of the facts which a serious student of the novel will desire to know. All the recent manuals on English literature have tried to do justice to the important place of the novel, and in 1898 Dr. Wells, in a volume entitled "A Century of French Fiction," added a careful study from Chateaubriand to Zola of what has long been acknowledged the chief literary *genre* in France. Besides the wide reading in the special field of fiction that anything like an adequate treatment of the novel demands, Dr. Wells brought to his work a breadth of scholarship and a crispness of style that are lamentably absent in most of the books of this class.

In 1899 the Macmillans published "The Development of the English Novel," by Prof. Wilbur L. Cross, of Yale, and this year the same house put forth "The Evolution of the English Novel," by Prof. Francis Hovey Stoddard, of the University of New York. These two books immediately challenge a comparison with a volume by Prof. Raleigh, published by the Scribners several years ago, and it is well for them that a marked difference of purpose prevents an exact balancing of good and bad points. Prof. Raleigh gave a short sketch of the novel from the earliest times to the publication of "Waverley," tracing carefully prose fiction in its rise into importance from the Greek novel of marvelous adventure through the romances of chivalry, euphuism, and arcadianism down to the firm ground of the

de Coverley papers. "The Development of the English Novel" touches only lightly on all that precedes Defoe, and takes practically the date of "Pamela," 1740, as the beginning. It aims to furnish an aid to the student and general reader in understanding the importance of the novel and in judging particularly the novelists of this century. It is, in its treatment of the work of each novelist, as the resultant of his own genius and the artistic heritage of his predecessors that the justification of the title "Development" is to be found. Richardson was a road breaker; Fielding in his novels reacted against the sentiment of the author of "Pamela," and swung the pendulum far the other way; and Goldsmith, in "Vicar of Wakefield," benefited from the work of both, producing a masterpiece of sane, healthy, and at the same time delicately tender fiction. As Fielding's naturalism came in reaction against Richardson's too roseate view of life, so Thackeray's was a reaction against that of Dickens; but in between Fielding and Thackeray, who are often compared, came Scott, adding a new element of interest in opening up the field of history. So Prof. Cross would show the continual forward movement of literature arising from the alternate supremacy of the realism or idealism in our nature.

There is truth undoubtedly in this, but in order to make a thesis of this nature attractive in form it would be necessary to devote a volume, perhaps not as large as the one we are considering, wholly to the facts supporting it, cutting out all superfluous literary history. Any attempt to point out in a way that would seem sympathetic to the partisans of each of the nineteenth century novelists the significance of George Eliot, Hardy, or Dickens, would involve a task herculean; for the modern novel, especially as it advances toward the problem stage, seems to have aims and purposes inversely as it has the elements of interest. Time has not had a chance to sift, and, until it does, a critical treatment of the English novel of this century is not for a single volume.

It was, perhaps, in recognition of this fact that Prof. Stoddard outlined his plan of treatment in "The Evolution

of the English Novel." He applies to the study of the novel a theory as much like Prof. Cross's as "evolution" is like "development," practically the same principle, with a difference in statement only. There is one definite idea of whose truth he is convinced, and which he wishes to make plain. Divesting himself, therefore, of all the *impedimenta* of literary history, and of all the critical seeking for values not necessary to his subject, Prof. Stoddard gives the whole of his volume to a consideration of those few novels which manifest most plainly what he believes a phenomenon true of all novels.

He applies himself more directly to the investigation of the rise of personality in the novel. The first novel, he takes it, which is essential to show the truth of this continuous development is "Robinson Crusoe," and "Robinson Crusoe" is the novel of adventure, is concerned purely with the externals of life. There is no human interest save that aroused in this one man, no domestic, no social life of any sort. The modern novel and the novel of the future are so entirely different from this remote prototype that we hesitate not a little before we class them together, and we do so finally only because of a barrenness in our critical nomenclature, and the awkwardness that results if we invent compound nouns to suit our meaning. At the last stage to which we have come in this evolution, the characteristics of a good novel, says Prof. Stoddard, are a scientific seeking for truth and a seriousness commensurate with this aim: the material with which the novel occupies itself is not external adventure, but the adventure, the experience of the soul in a highly organized social body. "A good novel is an inductive study in sociological biology." There has been a continual evolution from the external and lower to the internal and spiritual.

This theory, if true, should be manifest in the novel of Personality, in the novel of History, in the novel of Romance, in the novel of Purpose. For investigation in the first class, "The Vicar of Wakefield," "Pride and Prejudice," "Jane Eyre," and "The Scarlet Letter," are

chosen; in the second class, support for the theory is found in the understanding of the meaning of history which came in the eighteenth century, plus the realization of the value of the individual soul, due to the forces which brought, in politics, the French Revolution, and in literature the interest in the life of a commonplace individual, "Tom Jones;" in the novel of Romance we pass from the despairing revolt of Werther, the wanderer, against the conventionalities of society, through the splendid incongruity of "Notre Dame," to the life of Jean Valjean in "Les Miserables," giving himself for others; in the novel of Purpose, the day has passed when a Reade, a Kingsley, or a Dickens could look on the evils of life, write a novel descriptive of them, and say, "Do thus, and all will be well." Prof. Stoddard points out that the novel of Purpose seems to have gone with the splendid, but somewhat premature, passion for reform which characterized the second and third quarters of this century, but that in its stead there has come the purposeful novel, which gropes after the cure for the ills of life, but dares not suggest a specific remedy for a disease so multitudinous in its manifestations.

The conclusions reached in Prof. Stoddard's volume are interesting, and the reasoning is generally sound, though the premises seem to be a little arbitrary; the book is suggestive, not of great originality, but a distinct contribution toward a valuation of this great and important form of literature. There is to be said of this volume of Prof. Stoddard's, and of numerous briefer studies on the same subject, that it is unfortunate that a better style has not come of the long studies in literature which such books presuppose. There is, of course, always a feeling with a man who has become interested in an idea, has labored to develop it, and not found his labor in vain, that his work is done: he has but to put his facts down and let students avail themselves of them. The student can use dry facts, and does do so; but just as surely as good material is found in a carelessly wrought out or cumbrous form, so surely will the book's appeal be limited solely to students interested in

the particular subject. Dr. Wells's book and Prof. Raleigh's are remarkable among the volumes which we have examined for containing paragraphs, sentences, and happy turns of expression which make one linger, re-read, and take in with double interest the point to be enforced.

As to the final impression which a reading of many works on the novel leaves—the writers of these latter books, as men in studious universities are wont to do, are disposed to take their work too seriously. The very immensity of the public to which the novel appeals should assure one of this fact, that if the novel does become scientific, if the novel of the future is really to be a study in sociological biology, its days are numbered. A few people, the serious readers and thinkers, want the novel to be such for them, but the vast majority of readers come to the novel for amusement, for relief from the humdrum existence of a daily life whose cause they cannot understand, and though Mr. Marion Crawford would make the novel too frivolous in claiming for it the rights and immunities of a "pocket theater," he at the same time is very near truth in one of its aspects. The novel must be true because we are not interested in the false, but it must have the truth which contains joy and gladness, and not the truth which is false, because one-sided in its pessimistic realism. It must help us in our life, must ennoble, but its very means of doing this is its power of interesting and amusing.

Of course some one may say there are enough merely interesting novels in the world already, that we need now the great and serious studies of life; but this is partially an absurd statement, for the people who know of the charm and interest of novels already in existence are those who want the serious ones, and to those who know not of Goldsmith, Thackeray, and Scott for their pleasure, a serious novel is a bore. The people are going to continue to demand contemporary fiction, and this demand will create its supply. Unless fiction differentiates itself, and novels of many classes are produced, the form in its height of popularity is doomed. Thus much, we think, is to be said to those who would have the novel all work; but, as a matter of fact, the slightest con-

sideration of the modern novel shows that this differentiation has already taken place. If on the one hand "Resurrection" stands now at the head of the purposeful form, it is certain, on the other, that the people by whom the most novels are read will never see "Resurrection." The people to whom "Richard Carvel" is great do not want to read "Resurrection." The one is deficient in power, the other in interest, without either of which no novel can be completely great; and as now the whole of modern creative power is turned toward the novel in one form or the other, we can expect with confidence to see sooner or later novels perfect in their kind as we have seen dramas and epics perfect in their kind.

GEORGE CLIFTON EDWARDS.